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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to identify types of interactions associated with social influence among school children at three grade levels. Social influence was defined in terms of the ways in which a child attempted to convince other group members to adopt his or her opinions about the appearance of three different inkblots. Eighteen kindergarten, 18 third-grade, and 18 sixth-grade children were initially given one form of a standardized inkblot test. One week later, triads of subjects at each grade level were randomly assigned to an experimental condition designed to generate conflicts between peers by requiring each group to produce a unanimous response to stimuli which had previously elicited disparate responses. Children's interactions were videotaped and analyzed in terms of categories of social influence. The more influential children tended to adopt one of two leadership styles: one type of influence was characterized by responsiveness to peers' opinions and reactions, while the second type was more likely to include persistent and, frequently, forceful presentation of opinions. The peer-responsive child was more likely than the peer-nonresponsive child to compromise. Peer responsiveness and sophisticated use of influence techniques increased with age. (Author/RH)

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Social Influence in Children's Decision-Making Groups

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Abstract

This study focused on the types of interactions that demonstrate social influence among children. Kindergarteners, third graders, and sixth graders were initially given one form of a standardized inkblot test. One week later, triads of subjects at each grade level were randomly assigned to an experimental condition. In the experimental condition designed to generate conflicts between peers, the three children were asked to come up with unanimous responses to three inkblot cards which had previously elicited disparate responses. The children's interactions were videotaped for later analysis.

Two observers then analyzed the children's interactions in terms of categories of social influence. The more influential children tended to adopt one of two leadership styles. One type of influential child was characterized by responsiveness to the peers' opinions and reactions, while the second type of child was more likely to persistently and, frequently, forcefully present his/her own opinions until the peers yielded to his/her viewpoint. The peer-responsive child was also more likely to enter into compromises with other children than the peer non-responsive child. Lastly, peer responsivensss and sophisticated use of influence techniques increased with age.

While many psychologists have concerned themselves with descriptions of decision-making in a variety of social settings, few psychologists have attempted to study the actual social influence techniques that accompany decision-making in children's groups. Furthermore, there is a noticeable lack of research exploring these techniques in natural, face-to-face settings (cf., Moscovici & Faucheux, 1972; Costanzo, 1970; Costanzo & Shaw, 1966; Asch, 1956; Berenda, 1950).

A laboratory study using many of these earlier paradigms might tell an experimenter how different types of children respond to the same message from a peer, but this paradigm makes it difficult to observe other interesting and important phenomena. This kind of study would not provide much information about the kinds of social pressure that these children actually exert outside of the laboratory setting. When an experimenter controls the content of a social influence attempt s/he may artificially modify the spontaneous patterns of influence that develop within a group.

Beyond the necessity to design more naturalistic studies of social influence, there was a need to develop reliable categories of behavior that accurately describe children's social influence techniques at various age levels. The question of vital importance which has, for the most part, been ignored is: what does one child do while interacting in a group of peers to change the opinions of the other members in order for her/his opinion to prevail as the group's final decision? In

other words, rather than merely discussing how social influence operates on a conceptual level, we ask, specifically, how does an individual influence other members in a group?

Subjects. Fifty-four children participated in the study. The decision-making groups were comprised of three same-grade children. Eighteen five-year-olds formed the six kindergarten groups. Eighteen eight and nine-year-olds formed the six third grade groups. And, eighteen eleven and twelve-year-olds comprised the six sixth grade groups.

Procedure. In order to study the influence patterns among the group participants, it was necessary to present them with a task which would elicit disparate opinions and foster argumentation about those opinions. Secondly, it was important to choose a task where each member would theoretically have an equal voice in determining a solution to the problem, i.e., there were no externally defined correct solutions. Given these two considerations there was a need to utilize highly amgibuous material; standardized ink blots were used as the stimuli for the decision-making task.

After being randomly assigned to a group, each subject was administered twenty ink blots one week prior to the decision-making task. Three cards, out of the twenty, which elicited the most disparate responses among the three subjects were presented to the group.

When each card was presented the subjects were instructed to take turns telling each other what they thought the card looked like and were asked to "agree on just one thing it most

looks like." The experimenter left the room while the group was making its decision to minimize any possible adult involvement in the decision-making process. All sessions were videotaped for future detailed analysis.

In a preliminary analysis the two experimenters viewed half the videotapes from each age group in order to construct categories of social influence. Essentially, the two experimenters discussed their observations of the interactions and their impressions of specific children. More detailed analyses of the current data will be required to construct a more rigorous set of categories.

Results. Social influence was defined in terms of the ways in which a child attempted to convince the other group members to adopt his/her opinion of each blot. Success was measured by the degree to which his/her previously held opinion was unanimously accepted by the group, e.g., was there compromising, fusion of two or more responses, or creation of a new response.

There were few differences between the behaviors of the sixth and third grade groups. While differences among the behaviors of the sixth graders and the third graders were subtle, it appeared that the sixth graders were not as heavy-handed about forcing opinions on group members. In essence, the sixth graders appeared to work at minimizing conflicts in the session more than younger children. The oldest children quickly focused their attention on the task, tended to give

verbal justification of a response to a card, and were more likely to seek out the opinions of their peers than the younger children.

Those third and sixth graders whose opinions were adopted, i.e., more influential children used two primary approaches. The peer responsive approach was characterized by a presentation of an opinion, an explanation of that opinion, and task related comments (e.g., "It's a bat, here's the wings and head. Ok, we need to agree, ok?"). Children who adopt this first approach were also more likely to enter into compromises with their peers. For example, two children's "butterfly" and another child's "dragon" might be fused into a diplomatic "dragon eating a butterfly."

The peer non-responsive approach was less socially refined--from an adult viewpoint--than the first approach, but still quite effective in many children's decision-making groups. The main characteristic of this approach was a repetition of the opinion until the child essentially wore down the other members in the group; without compromising or attending to rules of social discourse, these children persisted until the others acquiesced. In both approaches children were cognizant of the task situation.

On the other hand, the kindergarteners were generally less attentive to the task. While they were able to take turns telling each other what the card looked like, there was a "rote" quality about their performance; they knew that they were to arrive at only one response, but did not attempt to convince

each other about which opinion to adopt. One child's opinions appeared to be as valid as another's. Thus, one kindergartener would readily defer the decision about a card to another child; however, later in the same group session, that child might declare that it was "my turn to say what it is," since the other members had already taken a turn deciding on a response for the group.

Implications and Conclusions. This study will provide a substantial contribution to the literature on peer interaction and social influence in childhood. It will add clarity and insight to the field by defining, observing, and measuring what is actually meant by social influence. Secondly, this study was completed in a quasi-naturalistic setting where it was possible to observe children's spontaneous interactions. Moreover, the age related increase in social awareness and responsiveness to the opinions of others found in this study confirms the findings of other investigators using different research designs (cf., Perret-Clermont, 1980; Damon, 1977; Doise, et al., 1975; Costanzo, 1970; Costanzo & Shaw, 1966; Berenda, 1950).

One of the advantages of this approach to measuring social influence is that it captures the excitement and spontaneity of children's social behavior with their peers while minimizing adult involvement in the decision-making process. Therefore, an investigator is able to more accurately describe the social role of peers at different age levels.

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